

2 more held over Rajbari attack

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Police have arrested two more people in connection with cases filed over the killing of Rasel Molla, and attack and vandalism at the darbar sharif of Nurul Haque, widely known as "Nural Pagla", in Rajbari's Goalanda upazila.

The two gave confessional statements before a court yesterday following their arrest late Wednesday night, police said.

The arrestees are Md Abu Sayeed, 45, and Md Rasel Sheikh, 24. Sayeed was held in Faridpur, while Rasel in Dhaka's Nakhhalpara area.

Rajbari Additional Superintendent of Police (Crime and Ops) Md Sharif Al Rajib said with these two, a total of 22 people have been arrested in two cases filed over the incidents.

Both were later sent to jail. On Monday night, the victim's father, Azad Mollah, a former member of Debgam Union Parishad under Goalanda upazila, filed a case with Goalanda Ghat Police Station.

He accused 3,500-4,000 unidentified people of murder, arson, burning of a corpse, looting, vandalism and causing injuries.

Syria busts Hezbollah-linked cell: ministry

AFP, Damascus

Syria said yesterday that its forces dismantled a cell affiliated with Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah group, a key ally of ousted president Bashar al-Assad.

"Specialised units in cooperation with the general intelligence service... were able to arrest a terrorist cell belonging to the Hezbollah militia that was active" in the Damascus countryside, an interior ministry statement said, quoting a local commander.

"Preliminary investigations showed that the cell members underwent training in military camps in Lebanese territory, and were planning to carry out operations inside Syrian territory that threaten national security and stability," the statement said.



Traffic came to a standstill yesterday afternoon as several hundred garment workers blocked the Kuril-Badda road, demanding unpaid wages. The resulting gridlock spread to adjacent streets, causing significant inconvenience for commuters. PHOTO: STAR

New delimitation sparks protests in Bagerhat, Faridpur

STAR REPORT

Demonstrators yesterday enforced blockades in Bagerhat and Faridpur, protesting the Election Commission's recent redrawing of constituencies in those districts.

As per the new delimitation, Bagerhat lost one parliamentary constituency, reducing its total from four to three.

Meanwhile, the Hamirdi and Algi unions, which were previously under Faridpur-4 constituency, were moved under Faridpur-2 constituency.

Demanding the restoration of the lost constituency, a platform of different political parties in Bagerhat enforced a 36-hour hartal starting at 6:00am on Wednesday, bringing the district to a standstill.

On the second day of the hartal yesterday, protesters blocked roads and highways at over a hundred points,



suspending communication with the other parts of the country.

Due to the blockade, the long distance buses as well as goods-laden trucks were stranded at several key areas, including the central bus terminal.

Shops and businesses across the district remained closed in support of the hartal. Protesters say if the lost constituency

is not restored, they will enforce dawn-to-dusk hartals from Monday to Wednesday.

Meanwhile, in Faridpur, residents of Hamirdi and Algi unions in Bhanga upazila blocked two major highways for the third consecutive day yesterday.

They enforced the blockade for around 12 hours since morning, protesting the EC's decision to reassign their areas from Faridpur-4 to Faridpur-2.

They blocked the Dhaka-Khulna and Dhaka-Barishal highways, bringing traffic on these vital routes that connect Dhaka with the country's southwest to a near standstill.

Hundreds of vehicles, including buses, trucks, and minibuses bound for Dhaka, were seen stranded on both highways.

Vehicular movement resumed after the protesters withdrew the blockade at 6:00pm, said Md Rokibuzzaman, officer-in-charge of Bhanga Highway Police Station.

Mismanagement, boycotts mar Jucusu election

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and OMR machines were supplied by Jamaat-linked businesses. We warned the administration, but they ignored us."

She alleged forged votes, obstruction of polling agents, preferential treatment for Shibir candidates, fading ink, faulty voter lists, and delayed polling.

Boishakhi added that their VP candidate was barred at Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Hall, an independent was attacked at Jahanara Imam Hall, and a Shibir candidate used a journalist's ID to access restricted areas without facing action. "This election won't reflect students' verdict. The administration has joined hands with Jamaat-Shibir to engineer the outcome. We have no choice but to boycott."

At a separate briefing, Sompritor Oikya GS candidate Sharan Ahsan said, "Students waited 33 years for this election, but the process turned into a nightmare. We demand a fresh election under a new commission."

The boycotting panels alleged polling agents were barred during the first two hours, washable ink was used, and leaflets of a particular panel were distributed inside booths, including women's halls where male candidates were allowed. They also claimed extra ballots were printed and found scattered. At Kazi Nazrul Islam Hall, ballots missing candidates' names were manually corrected.

They accused the administration of cancelling some candidacies while allowing others to bypass dope tests. Complaints from JCD, Shibir, and left-leaning panels went unanswered by the Election Commission.

Shibir-backed Shikharthi Jote

also criticised the EC. VP candidate Arifullah said at a 2:00pm briefing, "They were supposed to be fully prepared, but they weren't. Our request to place agents last night was granted very late, and hall authorities delayed letting them in."

He alleged former JCD activists roamed dormitories despite a ban on former students from 6:00am and said extra ballots were found in two halls. "Chhatra Dal boycotted because they were certain of defeat. This kind of withdrawal isn't healthy for democracy."

Earlier, JU authorities detained JCD vice president Hafizur Rahman Sohan for entering Rabindranath Tagore Hall in violation of the code of conduct but released him after he signed an undertaking. No action was taken against the JU Shibir president, also a former student, despite similar violations.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Gonotantrik Chhatra Sangsad-backed Shikharthi Oikya Forum alleged a "design" to favour some panels. GS candidate Abu Touhid Mohammad Siam said leaflets were openly distributed at polling centres without consequence and irregularities continued "in front of authorities".

IRREGULARITIES

Around noon, candidates reported inconsistent access for polling agents. Adri Ankur, president of one student union faction, said some agents were allowed into halls while others were blocked.

At 12:33pm, a ballot paper error at Kazi Nazrul Islam Hall caused confusion as voters were told to mark one candidate instead of three. The issue was later corrected.

Voting at Shaheed Tajuddin Hall was halted for 25 minutes due to missing voter lists and a lack of ink. Prof Saleh Ahmmad Khan, member of the Central Election Monitoring Committee, said 153 votes were set aside as voters had no ink mark and photos missing from the list.

Speaking to The Daily Star, he said he visited 13 halls yesterday and found the election largely peaceful, though there were some minor errors. "Most allegations were not submitted in writing, so the commission could not act on them.... All complaints are being sent to the university's legal adviser, and final results should not be declared until these are resolved."

At female Hall No-15, voting was suspended for an hour after rigging allegations.

Prof Dr Nahreen Islam Khan, present at the centre, said, "We witnessed female voters being taken to the back door of the polling room and marked as voters, in violation of rules. When we questioned the returning officer, she misbehaved with us. I was shocked to see voting amid such mismanagement."

Contacted, RO Shabnam Ferdousy said power outages disrupted polling and some ballot papers "accidentally fell" from voters' hands. "We continued using mobile flashlights. The pens used were supplied by the EC, which has already expressed regret."

Three BNP-leaning teachers - Prof Nazrul Islam, Prof Shamima Sultana, and Prof Nahreen - resigned from monitoring duties, citing widespread irregularities.

Nazrul said ballot papers and machines were supplied by a Jamaat-linked company, "proving the process

was politically motivated".

Journalists faced hurdles entering women's polling centres between 9:00am and 10:00am, despite regulations allowing media access.

First-year student Md Robiul Islam from Shaheed Rafiq-Jabbar Hall said, "I waited 20 minutes, only to learn my vote had already been cast." Polling officer Md Jakir Hossain confirmed via CCTV footage that a fake ID was used and reported the incident to the EC.

Voting ended at 5:00pm in most centres but continued until 7:00pm at Kazi Nazrul Islam Hall due to a delayed start. Counting began at 10:25pm. EC member Mafruhi Sattar said results would not be published before this morning.

Students voted for 40 positions - 25 in Jucusu and 15 in hall unions - with 177 candidates contesting in the central body and 443 vying for 215 hall union posts.

JCD PROTEST

Protesting the election, DU JCD around 9:00pm brought out a procession from Kabir Smarani near the New Arts Building to Chowrongi, where they held a rally protesting the Jucusu polls.

JU JCD Convener Zahir Uddin Babor alleged extra ballots were given to Shibir activists and demanded cancellation of the polls, a new EC, and a fresh schedule. "We'll submit a memorandum tomorrow [today] demanding a fresh election. We are also in talks with other panels who boycotted to launch a joint movement."

(Our Savar correspondent also contributed to this report.)

Do not slash journalist visas

Over hundred media organisations urge the US

AFP, Paris

More than 100 international media groups and industry bodies yesterday urged Washington not to slash the time foreign journalists can stay in the United States, saying the planned change would hurt its image abroad.

President Donald Trump's plan would "reduce the quantity and quality of coverage coming from the US" and "damage, not enhance, America's global standing", AFP news agency and 117 other signatories to a joint statement wrote.

Backers of the appeal ranged from international news agencies like AFP and Reuters, to public broadcasters including Britain's BBC, Germany's ARD and Australia's ABC, national newspapers like Canada's Globe and Mail or the Irish Times and press freedom groups including Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The Trump administration last month trailed plans to slash journalists' stays to a renewable 240-day period - or just 90 days for Chinese media workers - alongside a four-year limit on student visas.

Current rules allow journalists to stay in the US for up to five years, meaning they "gain the deep knowledge, trusted networks and contextual immersion needed to explain America to global audiences", the signatories said.

Mob kills man over alleged rickshaw theft attempt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

A man was beaten to death for allegedly attempting to steal a battery-powered rickshaw in Tangail's Madhupur upazila early yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Md Russell, 35, from Jamalpur's Madarganj upazila.

Quoting locals, police said three people had gone to one Jasim's house in Haludiya village around 3:30am to allegedly steal a rickshaw. When locals found out, they chased the three. Two managed to escape, but Russell was caught and beaten to death on the spot.

Madhupur Police Station Officer-in-Charge Emranul Kabir told The Daily Star that a police team went to the spot after being informed and recovered the body. "We sent the body to Tangail General Hospital for autopsy. Legal measures are underway."

Police to get two commissions

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with the home adviser or a minister as its chair, a retired justice of the appellate division as the vice-chair and the IGP as the member secretary.

A retired police officer not below the rank of an additional IGP and a rights activist would be in the commission too.

There will be four temporary members including a representative each from the leader of the parliament, the leader of the opposition, the speaker and deputy speaker, according to the PHQ proposal.

If the parliament is not in place, then the president will form a seven-member interim police commission in consultation with the head of the government.

A long discussion had taken place at the advisory council meeting regarding police commissions as part of police reforms, said Shafiqul Alam, press secretary to the chief adviser, at a media briefing yesterday.

Two key issues have emerged to improve the police investigation process and ensure accountability within the force, he said.

One of the focal points is the creation of an Independent Investigation Service within the police, which will allow investigations to be conducted free from any political or external pressure.

"It is critical that investigations within the police force be independent, ensuring no outside pressures, whether political or otherwise, interfere with the process. This new service will be implemented swiftly to strengthen the integrity of our law enforcement system."

The second key development is the establishment of an Internal Complaints Commission.

This commission will provide a transparent platform for addressing complaints regarding police conduct, ensuring accountability within the force, he said.

Both the initiatives will be managed by the law ministry in collaboration with Law Adviser Asif Nazrul, Housing and Public Works Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan and Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser for Home Affairs Khoda Baksh Chowdhury.

The advisers will work together to expedite the implementation of the reforms.

While the commissions will be executed under the purview of the law ministry, the home ministry will oversee the practical aspects of their implementation, Shafiqul added.

However, there have been different proposals regarding the composition of the commissions.

The consensus commission suggested making a nine-member police commission with a retired

justice of the appellate division as the chair and a retired police officer (not below the rank of additional IGP) as member secretary, according to home ministry officials informed with the proceedings.

However, the police reform commission had suggested an 11-member police commission with a retired justice of the appellate division or a retired IGP as chair and serving IGP as the member secretary.

On January 15, the Police Reform Commission submitted its report to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus recommending the formation of a neutral and independent police commission.

It also suggested seeking expert opinions on whether the commission should be a statutory or constitutional body.

On March 13, the cabinet division forwarded the recommendations to the home ministry requesting an action plan.

This is not the first time that steps have been taken to prepare an independent police commission.

Back in 2007, the caretaker government attempted to establish an independent police commission, which did not materialise.

The 2007 proposal recommended an 11-member commission with home minister or adviser as its chairman and the IGP as the member secretary.

The then-government formed the Bangladesh Police Act Drafting Committee, which prepared a draft ordinance aimed at freeing the police from political influence, ensuring accountability and maintaining transparency in recruitment and promotions.

The draft proposed the formation of both an independent police commission and a complaints commission to replace the colonial-era Police Act of 1861.

However, the ordinance was never implemented due to strong resistance from bureaucratic and vested interest groups, according to individuals involved in the initiative.

"An independent police commission is vital to remove political and bureaucratic control over the force - there is no alternative to this," said Towhidul Haque, associate professor at Dhaka University's Institute of Social Welfare and Research.

A strong commission is required in Bangladesh similar to those in the UK, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Hong Kong, said a senior police official requesting anonymity.

"We wanted an independent police commission, but proposing separate commissions for the force could create obstacles in the process, and this step may not come to fruition," he added.

There'll be no Palestinian state: Netanyahu

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All of Israel's settlements in the West Bank, occupied since 1967, are considered illegal under international law, regardless of whether they have Israeli planning permission.

Several Western governments, including Britain and France, have announced they intend to recognise the State of Palestine at the United Nations later this month.

Britain has said it will take the step if Israel fails to agree to a ceasefire in the devastating Gaza war.

Excluding Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, the West Bank is home to around three million Palestinians, as well as about 500,000 Israeli settlers.

Meanwhile, Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani has said that there must be a "collective response" to Israel's attack on the Qatari capital Doha, as Arab leaders rushed to the Gulf nation to express solidarity. At least 6 people were killed in the attack.

"There is a response that will happen from the region. This response is currently under consultation and discussion with other partners in the region," he told US media outlet CNN Wednesday evening, adding that "the entire Gulf region is at risk".

"We are hoping for something meaningful that deters Israel from continuing this bullying," Sheikh Mohammed added, accusing

Netanyahu of leading the region into "chaos".

"I think that what Netanyahu did yesterday, he just killed any hope for those hostages," he said, calling for Netanyahu to be "brought to justice".

In three days, Israel has carried out strikes in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Qatar and Yemen.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces killed 43 people across the Palestinian territory yesterday, according to medics and local health authorities, including 11 in strikes on various parts of Gaza City, five in a strike on a single location in the Beach refugee camp, and two who were searching for food near Rafah in the south.

Lebanon's health ministry

yesterday reported that an Israeli drone attack in the southern Tyre district hit a motorcycle, killing one person.

Humanitarian and human rights organisations have expressed alarm over Israel's forced expulsion order demanding one million people leave Gaza City, despite unsafe overcrowding further south.

With more and more children in besieged Gaza suffering from severe malnutrition, health workers said there is not enough medicine to nurse them or ease their pain.

The UN's health agency said Wednesday its workers will remain in Gaza City despite calls from Israel's military for people to flee an assault it is mounting there, reports AFP.